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ABSTRACT

Civic education in schools is necessary in a democratic society, so as to produce citizens who are able to participate in the system of self-government. Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey each emphasized the value of good citizenship and promoted the role of public education in teaching citizens the knowledge and skills necessary for responsible citizenship. The public concern with the quality of instruction in schools and for tax support of schools by all, is based upon a recognition of the benefit to all. Post-World War II emphasis in U.S. education on specialization and technical and vocational studies, has undermined liberal and civic education. Following Leo Strauss's criticism of the behavioral and quantitative emphasis, modern social science does not adequately educate people for political decision-making and participation in government, since it is not concerned with public spirit. The citizen's guiding purpose or perspective in self-government must be that of the public good, which is the result of an open and democratic process. Regarding the citizen in a democracy as an officeholder in government, the public spirit expected of any public official must be encouraged. This perspective needs to be explicitly taught at every level of education. (AS)

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A Rationale for Civic Education

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May 1989

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May 1989 (1)

A Rationale for Civic Education

Civic education means that education required by all people in a self-governing society, whatever their particular skills or walks of life, in order for them to perform properly in their public office as citizen. Jefferson put it simply in his first proposal, in 1779, for a system of universal primary education suited to the nation's new independent status: all citizens thus "would be qualified to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government." Such education, he explained to John Adams after each had served as President of the United States, "would raise the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety, and to orderly government. . . . Worth and genius would thus be sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts." To skeptics who thought this too high an idealism Jefferson replied, "if we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control [over government] with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion." (1)

Horace Mann picked up Jefferson's argument in the 1840s when he pointed out to the people of Massachusetts that "one of the highest and most valuable objects, to which the influence of a school can be made conducive, consists in training our children in self-government." "The very terms, Public School, and Common School, bear upon their face," Mann continued, "that

they are schools which the children of the entire community may attend. Every man . . . is taxed for their support . . . on the same principle that he would be taxed to defend the nation against foreign invasion, . . . because the general prevalence of ignorance, superstition, and vice, will breed Goth and Vandal at home, more fatal to the public well-being, than any Goth or Vandal from abroad." Mann argued as well that the development of rational intelligence, the training of young people so that they might rise from poverty and ignorance, the instruction in the processes of American government, and the inculcation of a morality suited to public enlightenment were all vital parts of a system of universal public education. "Is it obvious," Mann asked, "for the high purpose of training an American child to . . . become a constituent part of a self-governing people. . . . that . . . the law by which he is bound should be made intelligible to him; and as soon as his capacity will admit, that the reasons on which it is founded, should be made as intelligible as the law itself?" (2)

Mann's theory of <u>public</u> education thus was an idea guided fundamentally by its <u>public purpose</u>. He advocated in Massachusetts a system of education funded by the state (thus public in one sense), and he intended these schools be open to every child (thus public in yet another sense), but even more he was intent on the stake the public had in them to prepare young people to be good citizens. As Thaddeus Stevens had told the Pennsylvania legislature in 1835, "If every elective republic is to endure for any

great length of time, every elector must have sufficient information, not only to . . . take care of his pecuniary concerns, but to direct wisely the legislatures, the ambassadors, and the executive of the nation - for some part of all these things, some agency in approving or disapproving them, falls to every freeman. . . . This is a sufficient answer," Stevens thought, "to those who deem education a private and not a public duty - who argue that they are willing to educate their own children, but not their neighbor's children."[3] Public education, then, whether conducted in state-supported or privately-operated schools, was essential for every child because each would become a member of the public and thus require education for that role. It is therefore the public and not the private benefits of universal education which loom largest. This became the grounds not only for public concern for the quality of instruction in all schools, but also for the establishment of schools in every district supported by tax funds collected from everyone, whether or not they had children in school - the purpose of those schools was not primarily to educate individuals for their particular callings but to educate citizens for their public office.

This insistence on the public purpose of American education has remained strong. Advocates of the "Americanization" of immigrants and especially of their children had in mind - the need to train for self-governing citizenship those whose backgrounds made that taxing role unfamiliar. Even proponents of the new, comprehensive universities, though intent on scientific,

technical, and vocational studies, also argued that the nation's public life needed the infusions of knowledge and practical proposals such studies afforded. John Dewey made the connection explicit in explaining an updated philosophy of Democracy and Education (1917). Assuming as Jefferson and Horace Mann had that democracy required a properly-educated citizenry, Dewey simply brought new pedogogical and psychological insights to bear on the nature of that education. To Dewey, the classrooms themselves, especially at the elementary level, had to be little "laboratories of democracy" where students acted out the processes of discussion, "learning by doing," and public awareness that were the foundations of effective self-government. Dewey encouraged explicit attention to social and political problems by asking students to examine the communities they lived in, by learning about the wider world of public affairs, and by applying the critical standards of scientific analysis to it.

In what Diane Ravitch has called The Troubled Crusade of American education in the generation or two after World War II, there has been both affirmation of the Jefferson-Mann-Dewey thesis about education in a democracy, and a curious, simultaneous inflation and dilution of that idea. President Truman's Commission on Higher Education reported in 1948 that American colleges and universities should encourage students "to develop for . . . one's personal and civic life a code of behavior . . . consistent with democratic ideals, [and] to participate actively as an informed and responsible citizen" in the nation's public life. Because "the unity of liberal education had been splintered by

overspecialization," the Report concluded, college graduates "fell short of the human wholeness and civic conscience which the cooperative activities of citizenship require." Better balance was needed, therefore, between "specialized education aiming at a thousand different careers, and the transmission of a common cultural heritage toward a common citizenship."[5] Under this goal, hundreds of colleges included in plans of "general education" courses or programs designed to link cultural memory, critical thinking, ethical growth, and responsible citizenship.

Overwhelmingly, though, and especially as the post-war celebration of the democracy-validating allied and American victory over fascism faded, the emphasis on specialization, technical studies, and vocation that undermined liberal education generally has taken its particular toll on civic education. A social science group requirement often replaced the general education offerings on grounds that it better reflected the diverse researches of the faculty, which in any case no longer had interest or belief in the "common core of studies" idea. Emphasis turned increasingly to the parts - the hundreds (even thousands) of courses offered at modern "multiversities." This same ethos moved down to colleges, community colleges, and high schools as "multiversity" graduates taught in, or trained the teachers in, the lower branches.

In fact, university pre-occupation with the public policy dimensions of the social sciences reveals dramatically how off-target such work is from the Jeffersonian ideal of "informing the discretion" of citizens-to-be. In the first place, the direction

of instruction is reversed: instead of beginning with the perspective and attitude of the potential citizen which might then confront public questions, study tends to begin, investigatively, with a social science analysis of various "public policy" problems. The starting point is the sophisticated and objective collection of data. One must examine the problem - health care, tax rates, pollution of the environment, crime, etc. - so one knows the facts. Furthermore, as the facts are accumulated, including, in policy analysis, the "input" of the various "actors" and of concerned special interest groups, the usual assumption is that conclusions or policies will arise from the carefully manipulated aggregation of the data; the whole is simply the sum of the parts.

Though the process of arriving at policy positions is not generally seen as consciously competitive, it is usually undertaken within the "conflict-of-interest" assumption that in an open and pluralistic society policy is best understood as the resultant of diverse and competitive interests. Harking back to Madison's tenth Federalist Paper, "conflict-of-interest" theory sees tyranny prevented and policy properly hammered out as a multitude of interests (the more the better), clash and interact. The process is presumed fair, and policy best determined if access is open to all, if all then engage in vigorous self-advocacy, and if the decisions are made, after compromise, by majority vote. Justice, or the public good, is thus defined simply as the result of this open and democratic process; or at least it is presumed that one cannot do any better than that in a free society. Explicitly rejected, or perhaps simply ignored, is any notion

that the public good might be defined, in Madison's terms, as the rationally determined "permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

Whatever the overall merit and demerit of this approach, it implies, or at least seems to entail, a problematic lack of completeness in facing the full scope of political judgment and participation in a free and democratic society. It is laudibly open-ended, undogmatic, fact-attentive, tolerant, diverse, and pragmatic. It is also painstakingly faithful to the scientific mode of analysis. The accumulation of data and rigorous application of it to social problems is immense and impressive. Furthermore, a mode of leadership emphasizing accessability and skilled brokering of interests, and a mode of citizenship keyed to effective self-advocacy and sophisticated policy analysis, receive explicit encouragement - fine, as far as they go. But there is also a profound omission: it is a politics and a citizenship without a center, a purpose, a guiding perspective. It is thus susceptible to use or abuse depending on what purpose or perspective, stated or implied, enlists its methods and skills. To cite an extreme illustration, Adolf Eichmann presumably had high skills of statistical analysis, policy implementation, and communication of results, but we would not regard him as an exemplary public servant. Why not? Precisely because he lacked a humane purpose and perspective.

In speaking of the whole, merely behavioral and quantitative emphasis in contemporary social science, Leo Strauss once remarked that "it would be false to call the new political science diabolic: it has no attributes peculiar to fallen angels. . . . Nor is it Neronian. Nevertheless one may say that it fiddles while Rome

burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles and it does not know that Rome burns."[6] That is, behavioral and quantitative social scientists, intent on the minute and sophisticated examination of various parts of the body politic, often fail to realize how much their researches draw them into arcane, abstract, trivia; they fiddle. On the other hand their studies often neglect the larger problems of the world, the wider public and moral and humane concerns that give shape and quality to human life; they disclaim interest in whether or not Rome is burning. Though Strauss' judgment is not entirely fair, he does properly make an important point: modern social science, however effective in gathering and analyzing data, insufficiently attends to the need political decision-makers have for guidance from larger, more public-spirited perspectives and purposes. And in so far as social science foregoes interest in such matters, it simply is incomplete training for those taking part in government.

If we return then, to the concern of Jefferson and Horace Mann for "training our children in self-government," what can we say about education for citizenship in 1989? Following the distinguished philosopher Joseph Tussman, we should begin by regarding the citizen in a democracy as an officeholder in government.[7] That is, in discussing, voting, and acting in a self-governing society, the citizen is part, actually one of the ultimate parts, of the government itself. Thus the role differs only in degree from that of any elected or appointed official, or even from that of a monarch in a society ruled by one person. The essential obligation this entails, as we expect (though don't always

receive) from all office holders, is a perspective and habit that puts the public interest, the good of the country as a whole, above private, selfish, dynastic, class, or any other partisan interest. In training young people for the "office of citizen," which in the United States all enter at age eighteen, then, we must start and end with nourishing the essential, public-spirited stance expected of any public official. The skills of data collection, policy analysis, and communication taught by social scientists are important and useful, but standing by themselves they leave the political decision-maker, the citizen, without guidance at crucial points. That guidance can only properly come from an enlarged and disciplined way of looking at public affairs - what Benjamin Franklin at the Constitutional Convention called "the virtue and public spirit of the common people."(8)

Our sometimes cynical age is inclined, at this point, to ask for a definition of "public spirit," or "the public interest," or even to question whether such an idea can have an objective meaning. In the conflict-of-interest model, the public interest is often defined simply as the resultant of the self-interested forces at work in the political arena. Hence, in a free society it receives its definition from the interplay of a multitude of special interests. It neither assumes nor requires that any "public interest" objectively understood either exist or be sought directly by anybody. This view is beguiling because it allows, even encourages, individuals and groups to pursue their own interests, and because it relieves everyone - citizens as well as higher officials - from having to think about the common good.

Is there some way, then, in the late twentieth century, to think meaningfully about "public spirit"? In fact, the idea is both alive and well in a multitude of common sense perceptions, and essential to any viable concept of democratic government - and hence practical and necessary as the center of any proper education for democratic citizenship. What did it mean to Franklin, for example, in 1787? He had in mind the commitment to freedom and self-government that had caused thousands of ordinary

people to fight in the revolutionary armies. He saw also, in the quest for a new life that drew other thousands (eventually millions) from the oppression of the old world to the opportunities of the new, a unique potential for a willing acceptance of the obligations of citizenship in the adopted country. He insisted as well that land and wealth qualifications for suffrage ought to be eliminated because such possessions bore no corelation to the qualitative requirements of good citizenship. In reasoning that would become the theme of Jefferson's life and thought, Franklin believed that the essential qualification for the office of citizen was a public-spiritedness that arose not from wealth or status or class or sex or race, but from an intention, a willingness, eventually a habit, to seek the common good.

Eighteenth century political discourse defined the public interest as the opposite of corruption, which meant any form of self-seeking or bribery or partiality or factional spirit that opposed or ignored the well-being of the nation as a whole. Thus the public good consisted of the intention first to discern, through rational discourse, the idea of the interest of the whole, and second to work together to give effect to that idea. Though the assumption existed that there was such an objective good (often thought of as natural law or natural right), more directly on the agenda was the need to seek it, deliberately, reasonably, and disinterestedly. Of course it was recognized (in an age that took both Hobbes and Calvin seriously) that human beings were flawed and in part indelibly selfish, but it was also widely believed that people - ordinary people at least as much as the learned and the powerful and the wealthy - had some potential,

at least, for more noble thought and conduct. In fact, it was often noted that without such a faith, the whole notion of government by consent was "a prelude to a tragedy or a farce." "What are we to say to men who . . . pretend to be champions for the right and capacity of the people to choose their own rulers," Madison asked in Federalist No. 57, "yet maintain that they will [elect] those only who will immediately and infallibly betray the trust committed to them?" The framers of the American Constitution, along with the skepticism that gave rise to checks and balances, also believed that a dependence on the vigilance and judgment of the people had to be the "primary" reliance for achieving good government in a republic. This fundamental ambivalence, this sensing of both good and bad in human nature, is still at the base of thinking about self-government, and affords all the foundation needed for serious attention to the public education of citizens. There is a potential capacity in human beings, that is, for in some degree rising above narrow and self-serving states of mind which can be nourished, educed, drawn forth in our public schools. If that's not true, then democracy is not likely in the long run to make a constructive contribution to human history.

The drawing forth of this capacity requires initially a proper perspective. The public interest can be said to begin with an interest in the public, the taking seriously of the existence of a political community of which one is a part and the possibility of participating usefully in its common affairs. The foundation of this perspective is evident in a simple illustration:

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a committee is appointed to honor a respected and much beloved colleague about to retire. All agree on the idea of an honoring celebration, but have various incomplete, and perhaps incompatible notions of what to do. Since the intention is shared, though, a constructive discussion can and often does lead to an integrated plan better than any of the scattered ideas people had on their own. We might say the committee had an interest in the public; a sense of the objective need to contribute to the larger purpose. On the other hand, if some member of the committee offers self-interested arguments (say a restaurant owner who wants to make money by catering the celebration), it is perceived readily as an alien, inappropriate perspective, one that is not interested in the general good. The difference between self-interested and disinterested perspective is clear, as is the varying capacity of individuals to attain such perspective. Also apparent is the possibility of a result greater than the sum of the parts arising from the public intentions of the members, and the disfunctional effect of a merely selfish orientation. In admittedly more complex and ambiguous ways, these same distinctions in perspective, and the varying potential for common achievement, are present in discussions of all public issues and reveal the central need in civic education: to encourage an interest in the public as an objective reality and as an approach both within human potential and capable of yielding unpredictable benefits. Through such a process, William Sullivan has pointed out, "trust and mutual aid are built up which come to transform the individual into a citizen."(9)

Such an idea of citizenship, of course, has an ancient and honored lineage. It was central to Aristotle's argument that good government depended on the public virtue of those who ruled (all the citizens in a constitutional polity) and to the renaissance "civic republican" model requiring an independent, reasonable, and responsible citizenry. It was also central to Jefferson, Horace Mann, John Dewey, and other American proponents of democratic citizenship. All attended primarily to the "quality of the parts," the nourishment of the vital "public spirit" as well as practical skills of those who would take part in self-government. In our day, despite the pre-occupation of generations of social scientists with research skills and policy analysis and the useful application of them to American public life, the need for "public spirit", proper perspective, remains as strong as ever.

The teaching of such a perspective needs to be, and can be, woven into every level of education, but can as well be the explicit focus of "participation in government" courses. For seniors in high school (an ideal time because "the office of citizen" begins then for most Americans), for example, a Supreme Court case such as the recent New Jersey one on the right of school authorities to search student purses, can teach the vital lessons. Students readily understand the issue, and are keenly alert to both the rights of students and the responsibility of authorities to maintain a good learning atmosphere in the school. The facts can be grasped easily, the implications discerned quickly, and even the arguments of the Supreme Court opinions are, with careful explanation, within the understanding of most students. They learn primarily, though, not the legal technicalities,

or which is the "correct" opinion, but the broad view and careful reasoning of the justices on both sides of a split (5-3) decision. Students, that is, learn <u>how</u> to approach public questions: how to first understand the facts and issues, then see the lines of thought reasoned consideration can take, and finally move to responsible judgment. They learn primarily not what decision is "right," or even the processes of adjudication or the principles of constitutional law, but what the proper perspective is of the participant in government. With this in mind, students are ready to "practice" it in examining other public issues (crime, protection of the environment, arms control, etc.), in doing their own community research projects, and in considering and trying out various active participations in public life.

A further important part of such education for "the office of citizen" is some study of the development of responsible freedom and self-government, most notably in Western civilization. Attention to what Walter Lippmann has called "the tradition of civility," the attitudes and practices essential to the process of democracy over the centuries, the growth of free government in Anglo-America, and the ideas undergirding the American constitution, would help students understand the rich connotations of democratic citizenship. In any case, it is clear that constructive participation in free and democratic government must be grounded in some understanding of the evolution, principles, and practices of such government. These define, we might say, the liberal core of the public-spiritedness basic to all civic education.

Lest this approach seem unduly utopian about the capacity of human beings to achieve a public-spirited posture, let us

remember first the possibly even greater utopianism of supposing that all is O.K. in democratic societies when noone is expected or even encouraged to achieve such a perspective; when it is supposed sufficient to simply open up the political process to all people, groups, and interests, and then analyze various policies. Such a dynamic might work well, or at least be the best we can do in an free and pluralistic society, but in our interdependent world, one suspects this is less and less likely to suffice. Problems of global ecology and world peace may in our day require the forethought, reasoned approach, and concern for the good of the whole central to the "office of the citizen" - and may not be amenable to a "sum of the parts" approach. Instead, that is, of being niavely optimistic about human nature, the encouragement of the human potential for a vision beyond the narrowly selfish may, as the 21st century approaches, be the only practical thing left for us - or at least more practical than the very dubious optimism of supposing everything will be all right if we simply pursue our own special interests in free and open political arenas.

Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."(11) Though attention has focussed on the hard-headed insight that the human tendency to abuse power makes its dispersal, as a one-person one-vote government best exemplifies, the most effective way to prevent corruption and tyranny (bad government), the other part of Niebuhr's "vindication" of democracy needs equal emphasis. Human capacity (potential if not, at any given time or place, actual practice) in some degree

to sense what is fair, to understand right and wrong, to reason effectively, to exhibit compassion for others, and to act on behalf these qualities, Niebuhr argues, is as much a part of human nature as the indelible tendencies (also in varying degree) toward greed, short-sightedness, and partiality for our own interests. In fact, the existence of both tendencies is what makes the problem of human government both complex and interesting. Niebuhr's argument precisely follows that of James Madison: "If men were angels," he observed in the Federalist, "no government would be necessary." Yet, if the "fundamental principle" of some human capacity for reason and good judgment were "impeached," then democracy would likely provide bad government - and a "benevolent despot" might even be better. "In framing a government . . . by men over men," Madison concluded, "auxiliary precautions" such as checks and balances and a large, pluralistic country were useful, but a "dependence on the people [was still] the primary control on the government."(12)

The highest wisdom, in matters of government then, is to recognize the realistic way democracy prevents tyranny by encouraging a pluralism that disperses power, but to see as well the critical need to cultivate human capacities for justice, good will, reason, and public spirit. It is only mildly comforting, after all, to have a polity that, by setting interest against interest, prevents the worst results. Indeed, it is not even always the case that this happens: compromises fall between stools, or conflicting pathologies combine into potent evil conspiracies. At least as important, if we are to do more than merely survive,

is to draw forth, encourage, cultivate that part of our humanity which allowed Jefferson to suppose in the Declaration of Independence that "just" government "derived from the consent of the governed." And since there is simply no escaping in a democracy this linkage of just government and responsible citizenship, its encouragement must be a prime task of American education. The essential public spirit, moreover, since it is a pervasive attitude and intention, must be evoked and nourished at every level of schooling. Only such implementation and integration, from kindergarten through high school and beyond, will provide the "common cultural heritage, . . . the human wholeness, and the civic conscience that the cooperative activities of citizenship require."

(19)

SOURCE NOTES

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